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SUBJECT: VISIT OF CONGRESSMAN CHRISTOPHER SMITH TO HO CHI MINH CITY

REF: A) HCMC 1277; B) HCMC 846; C) HCMC 600; D) HCMC 1182; E) HCMC 847;
J) HCMC 1143; G) 04 HCMC 1481; H) HCMC 15; I) HCMC 1220; J) HCMC 687; K)
CMC 396

1. (SBU) Summary: In an intensive one day visit December 4, Congressman Chris Smith met with provincial government officials, prominent political dissidents and religious freedom activists. HCMC officials did not make any tangible commitments, but acknowledged their obligation to create a positive atmosphere for religious practice and welcomed the participation of religious groups in humanitarian activities, especially the fight against HIV/AIDS. Dr. Nguyen Dan Que, UBCV leader Thich Quang Do and other dissidents were firm that there could be no real political or religious freedom reform without ending the Party's monopoly on power. The dissidents acknowledged that international pressure -- particularly from the U.S. -- and Vietnam's international integration had increased personal freedoms. They favored Vietnam's WTO accession, but were split over how much linkage there should be between WTO and human rights and over the impact of international pressure on the internal party struggle between pro-China hardliners and moderates.

2. (SBU) Summary Continued: Key leaders of the Protestant House Church community, the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) and Cardinal Man noted improved religious freedom conditions since the promulgation of Vietnam's new legal framework on religion. However, the Protestants complained of inconsistent application of the law, particularly in rural, ethnic minority areas. Two separate meetings with Hoa Hao groups highlighted the split in that community; the Congressman bearded one group for its practice of using self-immolation as a form of protest. Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang made new allegations of torture against him and his followers, contradicting earlier information from his wife and lawyer. Congressman Smith was accompanied throughout by Human Rights Subcommittee Senior Staffer Eleanor Nagy. Ref A reports on the Congressman's December 3 meetings in Hue.

HCMC Government

3. (SBU) A smooth and polished Nguyen Thanh Tai, Vice Chairman of the HCMC People's Committee, emphasized the GVN's commitment to improving the "welfare of the people" by ensuring economic growth and "political stability." Tai welcomed Vietnam's international integration in general and intensified exchange and cooperation with the U.S. in particular. Congressman Smith said the U.S. experience is that religious tolerance and diversity is the only way to ensure continued prosperity. The Congressman stressed that the HCMC government should be as helpful as possible in implementing the legal framework on religion. It also should enable the participation of religious groups in the delivery of social services, particularly in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

4. (SBU) Tai acknowledged the importance of tolerance and diversity, and stated that the Communist Party recognizes that "religious belief is a need of the people." The Party also welcomes alternative views, so long as those views are "constructive." He noted that the HCMC government is seeking to facilitate the operation of religious organizations, for example, granting public venues for large-scale religious events during the Christmas season.

5. (SBU) Congressman Smith explained how his faith shapes and informs his actions and pressed the Vice Chairman on why the Communist Party prohibits membership for religious believers. Tai replied that the Communist Party also had a code of principles and that "Communists are just as prepared to sacrifice to uphold these beliefs." Individuals were free to leave if their beliefs and principles did not mesh with those of the Party, Tai concluded.

Hoa Hao Community

6. (SBU) Referring to the self-immolations of members of the Le Quang Liem faction of the Hoa Hao community in the Mekong Delta and HCMC this summer (Ref B), Hoa Hao elder Tran Huu Duyen, accompanied by his personal secretary, told the Congressman that it is a violation of Hoa Hao faith to self-immolate. Unlike Le Quang Liem, who considers the GVN-constituted Hoa Hao Executive Board (HHEB) illegitimate, Duyen is ambivalent. He told the

Congressman that he does not support the HHEB, but recommended the HHEB's current chairman to the GVN. Duyen said allegations of control of the Hoa Hao faith are exaggerated; the GVN has not forced any change of the Hoa Hao faith or doctrine. Overall, conditions for the Hoa Hao have improved significantly in recent years. However, the lack of an independent leader has split the Hoa Hao community, followers do not know where to turn to protest their grievances and thus fall into the orbit of the Le Quang Liem faction.

17. (SBU) Duyen said that he failed to dissuade Nam Liem (aka Vo Van Thanh Liem) from participating in events organized by Le Quang Liem over the summer. Unfortunately, Nam Liem threw gasoline on a provincial official, which led to his arrest and imprisonment. In September, Nam Liem was sentenced to six and a half years in prison for disturbing public order and resisting officials carrying out their duties. (Per refs B and C, during a ceremony held by the Le Quang Liem faction in the Mekong Delta in June, tensions flared with police after the Hoa Hao began protesting GVN control of the Hoa Hao church.)

18. (SBU) In a separate meeting, Congressman Smith met with four Hoa Hao supporters of Le Quang Liem: Bui Van Hue and three brothers of Nam Liem. They accused the GVN of trying to wipe out Hoa Haoism. They also complained about continued harassment, including cutting water and power to their homes and temples and detaining other followers of Le Quang Liem. They asked for the Congressman's assistance to secure the return of Hoa Hao properties seized after 1975. While supporting the right of the Hoa Hao to practice their faith free of government interference, the Congressman sternly cautioned the Hoa Hao against self-immolation, stating, inter alia, that it discredited them in the eyes of their followers and the international community.

Political Dissidents

19. (SBU) Human rights and democracy activists Nguyen Dan Que, Tran Khue, Do Nam Hai (aka Phuong Nam) and Father Chan Tin told Congressman Smith they were determined to continue the struggle to bring fundamental political reforms to Vietnam. Que said that Vietnam's economic reforms over the past twenty years had brought a gradual expansion of personal freedoms. He strongly favors accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) as Vietnam's participation in a rules-based system will hasten the demise of the Communist Party. Que said that Vietnam's reform process has been bolstered further by the visit of Prime Minister Phan Van Khai to the United States in June. It opened new possibilities for enhanced cultural and information exchange, which are particularly significant for Vietnam's youth. Que also pointed to the strengthening of institutions such as the National Assembly and the increasing availability of the Internet as developments that, over time, could limit the monopoly of the Party on power and information. Que then presented a nine-point roadmap for democracy, including release of all political prisoners, separation of the Party from the GVN by decree, and endorsement of a new electoral law, culminating in a call for general elections for a new constitution in Vietnam.

110. (SBU) Que noted that as the USG works with Vietnam on WTO accession, it should also emphasize that human rights and democracy are essential conditions for Vietnam's successful participation in the world economy. In this regard, the United States should find ways to reduce the Communist Party's power and "tip the balance" in favor of reformers inside the party in Vietnam. The international community also needed to strengthen the role of the National Assembly. Que suggested that the USG consider establishing a website to promote democracy in Vietnam, pass the Vietnam Human Rights Act, and organize a seminar on human rights and democracy in Vietnam. Que requested President Bush to meet with leading dissidents when he visits Vietnam for APEC in 2006: such a meeting would send a "powerful signal" to the Communist regime.

111. (SBU) Tran Khue, a former Communist Party member, added that hardliners and special interest groups are worried about the implications of WTO accession, because it will spell the loss of privilege and power for the Party. Khue noted ongoing harassment against him and that the police recently denied his application to travel to the Netherlands and the U.S. to attend democracy seminars. Both Khue and Do Nam Hai told the Congressman that on December 10, International Human Rights Day, they would launch an e-newspaper, the "Voice of Democracy," which would be the official publication of democracy activists in Vietnam. (Note: On December 9, Hai was detained for 24 hours and questioned by police on his pro-democracy activities before being released. The launch of the dissident website went ahead as planned. End Note.)

House Church Leaders

112. (SBU) In a working lunch, Congressman Smith met with seven leading pastors of Vietnam's house church community: Pham Dinh

Nhan, President of the Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship; Doan Trung Tin of the Vietnam Good News Mission; Tran Mai, Pastor-in-Charge of the Inter-Evangelistic Movement; Pham Toan Ai of the Vietnam Baptist Alliance; Duong Thanh Lam of the Assembly of God; Tran Cong Tan of the Seventh Day Adventists; and Nguyen Quang Trung, President of one faction of the Mennonite Church of Vietnam. Congressman Smith opened by outlining his efforts to promote human rights and religious freedom. He underscored his commitment to build on the meeting between President Bush and Prime Minister Phan Van Khai to secure greater freedoms in Vietnam, including expanding opportunity for religious groups to conduct charitable and humanitarian activities. The pastors welcomed U.S. pressure on Vietnam to improve conditions for religious freedom.

¶13. (SBU) The pastors told the Congressman that conditions for their churches had improved since the introduction of the new legal framework on religion in early 2005. That said, the majority told the Congressman of continuing, sporadic local harassment of their house churches, including police interference during religious services, confiscation of Bibles, and intimidation of believers to discourage them from attending services. A few pastors reported local police and authorities occasionally ignored the new Ordinance on Religion and Faith and still based their treatment on more restrictive regulations that were superseded when the new legal framework came into effect. In other cases, provincial-level officials intervened to end local-level harassment and allow house church activities to continue.

¶14. (SBU) Mennonite and Seventh Day Adventist leaders noted that police harassment had stopped following their application earlier this year for registration under the new legal framework (refs D and E). Authorities in the Central Highlands province of Gia Lai have begun proceedings to register two Mennonite congregations. Both leaders said that they hoped to petition the GVN for return of church properties seized after 1975 after their registration has been approved. Other house church pastors were more skeptical, saying the registration process is laborious and does not appear to yield concrete benefits for their organizations.

¶15. (SBU) Pastor Tin noted that church operations in the Northwest Highlands remained under significant pressure. The Vietnam Good News Mission -- a church seeding operation -- is working with 40,000 ethnic Hmong in 400 congregations. When his church attempted to register their activities with local authorities they were pressured to withdraw their application and told that Hanoi has not yet "instructed" the provinces on how to proceed. These congregations also have been fined for "illegal gathering" and pastors and worshipers faced police harassment and detention.

Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam

¶16. (SBU) Leaders of the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) told the Congressman that conditions for their church have improved since the promulgation of the new legal framework on religion. The SECV appreciated the international pressure on Vietnam that led to this welcome change. In addition to normalizing its operations nationwide, the SECV also hopes to recover 217 properties the GVN expropriated after 1975.

¶17. (SBU) Although conditions have improved, implementation of the legal framework is inconsistent and depends on the attitudes of village-level authorities. In many instances, officials tend to support the "rights of agnostics" over the "rights of believers." Rural, mountainous areas -- where three quarters of the SECV's activities take place -- are particularly problematic. The SECV leaders noted that forced renunciations of faith were common in the Central Highlands three or four years ago; the situation is markedly improved, although there continue to be sporadic reports of forced renunciation in remote villages. (Comment: We requested additional information from the SECV General Secretary on the new allegations of forced renunciation. The SECV General Secretary demurred, saying that the SECV wants to try and resolve the problems directly with Provincial and Central Committees for Religious Affairs first. Should this approach fail, the SECV would then turn to "other sources" for assistance. Per ref F, a member of the SECV in the Central Highlands province of Gia Lai told us local officials in Chu Prong district reportedly badly beat two ethnic minority believers and ordered one community of ethnic minority worshipers not to practice their faith. End Comment.)

¶18. (SBU) The SECV representatives noted their frustration that local officials have not been punished for gross violations of the law, while SECV pastors and preachers are routinely fined and harassed for inconsequential administrative violations. The SECV leaders also noted that, contrary to the house churches, which face government intervention if they become too big, the SECV faces pressure from the government to consolidate their Central Highlands "meeting points" into larger churches.

119. (SBU) Cardinal Pham Dinh Man, head of the HCMC Archdiocese, told Congressman Smith that he was initially skeptical about the new legal framework on religion when it was first promulgated. Noting that there are "101 ways officials frustrate religious belief," Man compared the situation in Vietnam to the plight of African slaves in the story of "Roots." However, there has been tangible improvement. For example, in June he transferred 60 priests within his diocese and ordained another 90 without government interference. In October he named 35 new candidates to seminary, again with no interference. HCMC authorities also have returned a few expropriated properties to the Church. Cardinal Man noted that the church has not been pushing hard for return of expropriated property en masse as it does not have the resources to rehabilitate them.

120. (SBU) Despite hiccups in cooperation, Man also noted positively that HCMC authorities for the first time asked the Church greater scope to assist in the fight against HIV/AIDS. The Church wants to do significantly more and would welcome the opportunity to participate in the PEPFAR program, an effort the Congressman strongly encouraged.

121. (SBU) Cardinal Man said Marxism-Leninism has not been taught in the HCMC seminary for the past two years and was an inconsequential part of the curriculum before that. Elsewhere it is largely perfunctory and consists of about 30-40 hours of lecture. Man also noted that, after years of foot-dragging, the GVN had finally agreed to create a new diocese in southern Vietnam. Man was hopeful that in 2006, the GVN would approve a pending request to open a new seminary in Dong Nai province. Man was content to let GVN showcase these developments to answer international critics of its religious freedom policies, so long as the Church got what it wanted in the process. The Cardinal closed by telling the Congressman that one needs to be "very very patient" in Vietnam.

Thich Quang Do

122. (SBU) Energetic and well-briefed, Thich Quang Do -- General Secretary of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam

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(UBCV) -- greeted the Congressman at the entrance to his Thanh Minh Zen Monastery. Prior to the visit he had spoken with Vo Van Ai, Director of the International Buddhist Information Bureau (IBIB) based in Paris, and thanked Congressman Smith for his advocacy for human rights and religious freedom in Vietnam. Echoing themes from past meetings with the Ambassador and other USG officials (refs G and H), Thich Quang Do warned against trusting the GVN; specific measures must be place to prevent backsliding. For example, in 2005 the GVN began to ease up on religious organizations out of fear that CPC designation would complicate Vietnam's WTO accession. Even the UBCV benefited from a respite in pressure. However, when it became clear that Vietnam would be re-designated a country of particular concern and that the GVN would fail to close out negotiations with the U.S. by the end of 2005, the Party stepped up its repression of the UBCV. This led to his confrontation with police at a HCMC pagoda on November 19 (Ref I) and the increased harassment of UBCV leaders in other provinces.

123. (SBU) Thich Quang Do told the Congressman that in the run up to its tenth Party Congress, the Communist Party is badly split between hardliners beholden to former Party General Secretary Do Muoi and former President Le Duc Anh and reformers led by former Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet and Prime Minister Phan Van Khai. According to Do, hardliners have been working to scuttle improved relations between the U.S. and Vietnam. This same group also is firmly opposed to economic reform. Speaking like a seasoned opposition politician, Thich Quang Do criticized the hardline faction's pro-China leanings and the "ceding of Vietnamese territory to the PRC." Do placed Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung firmly within the pro-China camp; HCMC Party Secretary Triet "might be" a reformer.

124. (SBU) Saying that he has banded together with other political and religious freedom activists to push for political change, Thich Quang Do said that Vietnam cannot develop under a one-party dictatorship. Whereas in the past he opposed the application of sanctions, for fear of hurting the Vietnamese people, he is reconsidering. Perhaps if the Vietnamese people "suffer once," it may spark them to "stand up" against the Party. However, he acknowledged that sanctions might be counterproductive and could tip the balance within the Party in favor of the hardliners. He noted positively a December European Parliament resolution on human rights in Vietnam and urged the U.S. Congress to pass the Vietnam Human Rights Act.

Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang

125. (SBU) In an evening meeting, Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang, accompanied by his wife Le Thi Phu Dung, read from a

prepared letter detailing recent examples of GVN violations of religious freedom as well as his proscriptions for reform. In contrast to the other house church leaders, Quang, amnestied from prison in September 2005, alleged increased harassment of his church in recent months. Quang added that Mennonite preacher Pham Ngoc Thach -- the last of the "Mennonite 6" still in prison -- has been tortured in prison. Quang claimed that he too was beaten regularly in prison, but he previously "had not dared" to inform anyone of these incidents.

126. (SBU) Quang said that, within the past few weeks he, former Mennonite 6 co-defendant Le Thi Hong Lien and his wife had traveled to Hue "in secret," and "had eluded officials" to pay a midnight visit to Fathers Ly and Loi. Responding to a question from the Consul General, Quang denied that he was being singled out for increased police scrutiny. Other house churches were facing the same harassment, but were "too afraid to divulge these facts." (Comment: per refs J and K, Quang's wife and Quang's lawyer separately told us that following their visits to prison, they had not seen any evidence that Quang or Thach were beaten. We also have been unable to confirm other allegations of torture involving other members of the "Mennonite 6.") Another Presbyterian house church pastor noted that Quang's group had a tendency to exaggerate to gain international attention and sympathy. Other house church pastors have told us that police pressure on Pastor Quang's house church declined substantially following his release from prison. End Comment.) WINNICK